A Dream Engineering Ethic

A space for collectively figuring out what values we want to commit to as a community of Dream Engineers

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This is a working, evolving draft. Please feel free to comment. Gratitude to editors thus far: Ryan Bottary, Dan Denis, Rod Mullen, Paul Seli

This set of principles is written in response to new scientific developments that enable the direction of specific cognitive
content in sleep and dreams
. This includes technologies for enhancing specific memories and dampening others during sleep, techniques that allow the formation of new habits and associations during sleep, and protocols that can change the actual subject matter and substance of dreams. We haven't arrived at Inception, and we're not under the impression that it's around the corner, but it's not seeming like complete sci-fi anymore.
We have learned that the dreamspace, while it is precious and personal, is also porous and available to outside influence. Collectively, we refer to techniques that are meant to alter dreams as Dream Engineering.
The implications could range far and wide.

We are embarking on, and asking others to join, a new kind of dream. This is a moment of transition and transformation for the sort of self-knowledge we can have: Sensors feed images of ourselves back into our eyes and ears, from heartbeats to brainwaves, creating a feedback loop of seeing and being.
Each of the sleep and dream engineering techniques above is built on top of
developments in sensor technology, which enable active intervention on sleep experience and function. For example, a smart-speaker by the bed can determine sleep stages with sound analysis, and can send a signal to a smart sleep mask or necklace to release a specific scent we have preprogrammed to change our emotion and memories
overnight.

Techniques like this suddenly render the dreamscape—a territory that is nearly synonymous with the untamed interior—subject to scientific manipulation. There is great opportunity here for growth and insight. Control
of dreams allows for controlled experimentation on dreams, and all the ensuing knowledge that such scientific pursuits promise. We envision that nightmare treatments, learning enhancements, overnight therapy, augmentation of creativity, and overcoming addiction are all

within the realm of possibility. Yet, there is also the potential for great peril: the threat of the capture, sale and colonization of the dreaming self in the form of data; the outsourcing of introspection, trusting sensors more than senses;
and the infiltration of our most private spaces by those who may wish to harm or manipulate us. Dreams are the ineffable, the inexplicably personal, the stories with which we make and remake ourselves. They guide how we remember, ruminate, and reminisce—we must understand and regulate outside interest in and influence on them.

At their best, these scientific protocols and sensor technologies function as keys to open doors to ourselves, for exploration or augmentation of the recesses of the mind. At their worst, they are simply an expansion of a techno-optimist, capitalist imperative that asks us to yield more of ourselves to a normative notion of 'optimized' which does not serve us.
They are built for anyone to use in ways they choose, on themselves, and yet we can do little to control the uses of a tool, especially one that is open-source. As a new area of the mind is exposed to influence, we hope to outline ethical guidelines for the creation of Dream Engineering techniques. Many of these guidelines apply to the waking self as well: ***We would prefer a world wherein the sale and manipulation of the attentional waking self is not normalized, but we hope that privacy concerns and targeted advertising attempts***
raise more hackles in the bedroom than they have in the browser. Brain science (attentional neuroscience, affective psychology) provided the material to chain the waking mind to the infinite scroll, and the inattentive unconscious self must not succumb to the same, so we put our ethics on the page. We do this acknowledging that (a) we should not hide behind these intentions, (b) we are responsible for how our projects change after deployment, and (c) we will seek to intervene if they are being used unethically.

1) Your dream
is your own, always
. We will not create technologies that tell you what your dream means.
We will not participate in the incubation of any dreams
that people do not expressly ask for ***and give consent*** to dream.

2) "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera." American portraitist Dorothea Lange quoted in: Los Angeles Times (13 Aug. 1978). Noticing shadow, light, and luster through a lens opens our eyes to the world, even when we put the camera down and look for imagery worth framing. We are building cameras for capturing internal imagery, and we will design tools that do not create dependency, but rather teach and then render themselves unnecessary.

3) We are not nearly the first community to try influencing dreams. These practices are ancient: Yoga Nidra, the Sarapeum, Mohave Shamanism, and so many more. We will balance respect for and integration of these techniques as we build and enable their use with modern technology.

4) We will build alongside and for communities which are broader than the WEIRD bias typically present in psychological studies--Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic.

5) We present the limitations of our work absolutely clearly
.

6)
We build technologies which enable not enforce (no demands to change sleep or dreams), and supplement not substitute (no replacing innate capabilities
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7) We will be mindful and vigilant of how our technologies alter the physiology and architecture of natural sleep. We will strive to minimize impact
on sleep quality
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